



Changing land use in the countryside: Stakeholders' perception of the ongoing rural planning processes in Flanders

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ABSTRACT

Rural areas in densely populated regions face increasing competition for land. Consequently, land use planning processes must attempt to balance the goals of diverse stakeholders and the process of reaching consensus becomes more complicated. By investigating the perception of the actors involved in rural planning, this research contributes to the knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of such processes. We have focused on the case of rural planning processes in Flanders in which proponents of nature and agriculture are competing for land. Data are collected through open interviews with key actors such as farmers, representatives of nature preservation organisations, farmers' unions, and employees of the relevant governmental policy areas. Data analysis according to the grounded theory approach resulted in six categories and 26 concepts that represent the stakeholders' perception of difficulties in the Flemish rural planning approach. Three points where difficulties arise are (1) the link between envisioning, drawing up the plan and implementation, (2) the need for data, and (3) the role of sectors. We use three concepts from literature (procedural justice, distributive justice and value conflicts) to frame the difficulties observed. Based on this analysis, we discuss several ways to improve rural planning processes.

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Introduction

Rural areas in densely populated and urbanising regions are faced with an increasing demand for land. Urbanisation is encroaching upon the rural areas and threatening open space (Antrop, 2004; Schmied, 2005 and others). Moreover, societal expectations for the countryside are changing due to developments such as an increasing awareness of the need to protect vital ecosystems and natural processes, higher incomes, increasing leisure time and increased mobility (Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007; Jongeneel et al., 2008; Zasada, 2011). Agriculture, which has historically been the main user of rural land, now has to compete for land with other functions, such as housing, commercial activities, nature, woods and recreational areas (Oltmer, 2003; van den Brink et al., 2006; Jongeneel et al., 2008; Zasada, 2011). In some cases, these developments even result in a blurred appearance of rural and

urban, creating a 'rurban' zone that serves a multitude of functions (Sieverts, 2003; Vanempten, 2011). This growing pressure on rural land and the necessity of a multifunctional development of the rural area is acknowledged in the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) as well as in other literature (CEC, 1999; Brandt and Vejre, 2004; Gallent et al., 2006; Busck et al., 2009).

Various planning systems and instruments have been developed to deal with this pressure on rural land, aiming for example to manage urban growth, to control land use changes and to protect the remaining open space and farmland (Duke and Aull-Hyde, 2002; Koomen et al., 2008; Busck et al., 2008). Plans such as the Copenhagen Finger Plan, the London Green Belt or the Randstad and its Green Heart illustrate that the focus of many planning systems is on managing the conflict between urban development or sprawl versus conservation of open space (Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007; Busck et al., 2008; Koomen et al., 2008). However, the traditional distinction between urban and rural has lost most of its relevance for spatial planning in areas where the rural and urban appearance is blurred (van den Brink et al., 2006). Moreover, the contemporary countryside is characterised by a decreasing dependency on agriculture and a growing awareness of the need to protect vital ecosystems and natural processes. Likewise, countryside planning is moving from an agriculture-based

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to an environment-based approach (Bishop and Phillips, 2004; Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007). The dichotomous planning model of 'open space-versus-urban development' has thus developed to a triangular model of 'agriculture-versus-nature-versus-urban development' (Koomen et al., 2008), in which nature and agriculture often stand in opposition in the quest for land (van der Valk, 2002; van den Brink et al., 2006; Henle et al., 2008; Bomans et al., 2010).

Within this context, planners and decision-makers are not only confronted with increasing functional claims, but also with a growing number of stakeholders who often have conflicting interests (Albrechts, 2004). Consequently, rural land use planning seems to be caught between the need to protect and preserve areas for nature development and food production, intertwining the former agricultural functioning with other land uses, and at the same time meeting the goals and wishes of various stakeholders. The growing claims on the limited amount of space give rise to increasing social controversies. Land use policies relating to the question of 'agriculture vs. nature vs. urban development' often result in conflicting opinions among planners, developers, farmers and rural residents and ultimately result in resentment towards the planning processes (Spaling and Wood, 1998; Wolsink, 2003; Boonstra, 2006; Leinfelder, 2007; Gilg, 2009). It is unclear which direction of development should be preferred. Moreover, the problem-solving capacity of planning systems seems to have changed because reaching consensus appears to have become more difficult and the processes are often time-consuming (Wolsink, 2003; Boonstra, 2006). Simultaneously, an increasing need for community participation and stakeholder involvement has arisen (Healey, 1997; Albrechts, 2004).

Planning systems have been altered in response to these trends. Several studies describe the effectiveness of specific planning instruments for goals such as growth management, protection of open space or farmland preservation (Frenkel, 2004; Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007; Koomen et al., 2008). Many studies have been done on the weaknesses and strengths of the various planning approaches that have been developed over time. These discuss for example the introduction of participation in the planning process (e.g. Healey, 1997, 2007; Tewdwr-Jones and Thomas, 1998; Sager, 2009; Jones and Stenseke, 2011) or the most appropriate level (local versus national) for planning (Tewdwr-Jones, 1998; Mell and Sturzaker, 2011). Several authors discussed the Dutch planning system, which is often considered to be an exemplary system of spatial planning (van der Valk, 2002; Wolsink, 2003; van den Brink et al., 2006; Koomen et al., 2008; Alpkokin, 2012). Busck et al. (2008) compared the Dutch planning system to the Danish and Swedish systems. The studies all assess whether the approaches applied succeeded in achieving their goals and they search for factors to explain this success or failure. In this way, they stimulate the continual adaptation and evolution of planning theory. Additionally, research has been performed assessing the perception of stakeholders concerning the object of rural transformations, e.g. development of nature reserves and afforestation (Trakolis, 2001; NíDhubháin et al., 2009), residential development patterns (Zabik and Prytherch, *in press*), greenhouse clusters (Rogge et al., 2011) or wind turbines (Gross, 2007; Wolsink, 2007; Warren and McFadyen, 2010).

The goal of our research is to contribute to the knowledge on spatial planning approaches and how they cope with the abovementioned rural transformations. Specifically, our aim is to shed light on this matter by assessing the rural planning processes from the stakeholders' point of view. This point of view is important because of the emphasis on stakeholder involvement in current planning approaches and the recorded conflict and resentment among the stakeholders involved in rural planning processes. To obtain insight into the stakeholders' perception of planning processes, we performed in-depth interviews with

diverse stakeholders. We focused on the case of rural planning processes in Flanders, particularly processes characterised by tension between agriculture and nature. The critical review of rural planning processes in this case is expected to contribute to the overall knowledge on rural planning processes and to provide guidance to policymakers and practitioners (Alpkokin, 2012).

This paper is divided into six sections. We start by describing the research methodology. The main aspects of the methodology are the choice of a case area, the performance of in-depth interviews and the application of grounded theory. In the next section, the results of the interviews are presented. In the discussion section, we compare our results with literature on spatial planning approaches and rural land use transformations. (The description of the research results precedes the theoretical framing based on literature because of our use of the grounded theory approach.) Starting from the overall analysis, we discuss in a separate section proposals for improvement of the rural planning approach in Flanders. The final section presents the conclusions of this research.

Methodology

Rural planning in Flanders as a case

Flanders, the northern region in the federal state of Belgium, is used as a case to investigate the stakeholders' perception of rural planning processes. This region is confronted with the above-described trends that lead to a high demand for rural land, conflicting interests and difficulties in spatial planning policy. In this section, we briefly explain the rural planning situation in Flanders.

In Flanders, rural planning is mainly embedded in spatial planning policy. Spatial planning policy is assigned to the regions in Belgium, thus Flanders is responsible for its own spatial planning. The Flemish spatial planning policy is mainly based on two types of plans: the spatial structure plan (SSP) and the spatial implementation plan (SIP) (RWO, 2011; Kerselaers et al., 2011). Both plans are made on three governmental levels: the regional (Flemish), provincial and municipal level. An important vision for the rural area, stipulated in the Flemish SSP in 1997, is that the total area of forest and nature reserves should increase at the expense of the agricultural land area (RSV, 1997). To implement this vision, a planning process has been started in 2003 that aims to demarcate the agricultural and natural structure in Flanders (AGNAS). This demarcation is being consolidated in regional spatial implementation plans.

Other examples of planning processes in Flanders that are characterised by a tension between the open space functions, are the demarcation of valuable heritage landscapes, the nature compensation in return for development of other functions, e.g. dockland expansion in valuable natural areas, and the implementation of the *Natura 2000* directive where goals are formulated to preserve specific habitats and birds. These planning processes appear to be encountering difficulties. For example, after 8 years the demarcation goals of the Flemish SSP have not yet been reached: only 30% of the intended increase of natural areas has been consolidated into a SIP (RWO, 2011). Moreover, the processes seem to cause a great deal of resentment among the actors involved (Leinfelder, 2007).

Grounded theory approach

In order to grasp the heterogeneity of the perceptions and the nuanced opinions of the involved stakeholders, in-depth open interviews were performed with the actors involved in rural planning processes. This qualitative approach is useful to offer insight and enhance understanding of the planning situation. Following the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), the

Table 1
Professional background and number of respondents per category.

Background	Number of respondents
Agriculture Policy Area	7
Nature and Forest Policy Area	5
Spatial Planning Policy Area	2
Heritage Policy Area	2
Provincial and municipal employees	3
Farmers	6
Farmers' unions	4
Nature organisations	2
Total number of respondents	31

theory is allowed to emerge from the data, rather than testing an a priori outlined hypothesis. This is crucial because of our focus on the stakeholders' perception and the diversity of prejudices towards each other observed among the actors involved in rural planning.

To begin the interviews, we asked the interviewee to describe which planning processes he or she has been confronted with recently. Starting from the interviewees' concrete examples of planning processes, we explored further themes from the interview guide, i.e. the goals of the planning process, the approach of the planning process, the stakeholders involved in the planning process, and the opinion of the interviewee on the course of the planning process. The interviewees discussed various planning processes throughout the interviews, e.g. afforestation projects, the designation of the *Natura 2000* areas and nature compensation due to dockland development in *Natura 2000* area. Because the AGNAS process is currently important in Flanders, this process was discussed in many interviews.

Data sampling

The idea behind data sampling in grounded theory is to purposefully select respondents who will be most helpful in understanding the problem and the research situation (Creswell, 2003). The aim is to choose a small number of cases that will yield in-depth data for theory construction, rather than a random selection of a large number of data points to give us statistical information about the opinions of an entire population (Koontz, 2003). The selection of stakeholders was carried out by a combination of the methods of theoretical and snowball sampling (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Rogge et al., 2011). The aim of our sampling approach was to consider the whole range of thematically relevant positions in the population (Soliva, 2007). We repeated the cycles of data collection and data analysis until the data collection stopped yielding additional relevant insight into the research topic.

The first interviewees, who served as entry points for the snowball sampling, were selected in different ways. The most important entry point was one key person in a region with an ongoing, relevant spatial planning process. Starting from this entry point, the snowball sampling led us to various respondents who were involved in several planning processes throughout Flanders. For the farmers, a farmer's union representative served as an additional entry point. In total, 31 respondents were interviewed, spread over the various actor groups involved (Table 1). The distribution of interviewees may seem unequal, but no additional interviews were performed, because the last interviews added no new information. Interviews were performed between December 2010 and August 2011 in three data collection phases. The discrete phases allowed us to analyse the data between phases. Each interview lasted between 1 and 2 h.

Data analysis and coding

The data gathered throughout these open interviews were analysed according to the coding approach of Strauss and Corbin

Table 2
Overview of the six categories and 26 concepts that determine stakeholders' perception on ongoing spatial planning processes in Flanders related to nature and agriculture.

Category	Concept
Societal context	Position of agriculture
	High pressure on land
	Power relation agriculture – nature
	Socio-cultural values
Planning context	Importance of individuals
	Distrust and strategic behaviour
	Planning history
Planning approach	Vision–plan–implementation
	Need for sectoral vision
	Focus on spatial structures
	Sectoral planning
	Consensus
	Rational arguments
	Political choices
Individual stakes	Individual farm impact versus long term vision
	Prevent personal tragedies
	Creation of public support
Compensation mechanisms	Controversy on fairness of compensation
	Complex/changing legislation
	Uncertainty
	Urban legends
Participation	Lack of guidance
	Lack of participation
	No genuine participation
	Role of stakeholder organisations
	Power to block plans

(1998). The data of the first two interview rounds (18 interviews) were analysed by *open coding*. The data were broken down into discrete incidents, ideas, events and acts. Each *phenomenon* that was related to the stakeholder's perception on rural planning processes was given a name. A phenomenon that was mentioned by two or more respondents was defined as a *concept*. After the open coding, the concepts that emerged were analysed and grouped into distinct *categories*. In the third round of interviews, at the end of the interview the opinion of the respondents about the results of the earlier interviews was assessed. The respondents were asked whether this interpretation matched their personal experiences. When a respondent introduced new information, we re-evaluated the concepts and categories.

In the next step, the concepts and categories are reassembled by *axial coding*. This implies the determination of links and cross-cuts between categories in order to find more complete and precise explanations of the phenomena. In reality, the process of open coding and axial coding are closely intertwined and are not as consecutive as described above. In the final analysis phase, the categories were integrated and refined into a larger theoretical scheme via *selective coding*. Based on all the data gathered in the interviews, a *grounded theory* was proposed. The process of axial and selective coding relates the distinguished categories to each other. This results in a theoretical scheme that visualises the involved actors' opinions of the key factors responsible for difficulties in the ongoing planning processes.

Results

Table 2 summarises the main results; the following paragraphs explain each of the categories and concepts. To illustrate the factors that determine stakeholders' perception towards the investigated spatial planning processes, quotations from the interviews (in italics) are added to the text. The affiliation of the person who delivered the quote is indicated between brackets. The quotation does not necessarily represent the overall opinion of the related group.

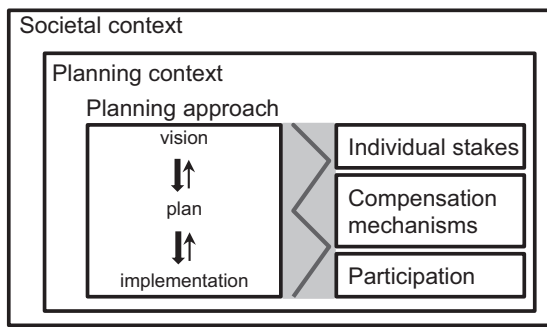


Fig. 1. Stakeholders' perception on current planning processes in Flanders: visualisation of the relation between the six categories presented in Table 2.

Throughout the interviews, we observed that certain opinions can in general be attributed to specific groups but the opinion was certainly not univocal.

The large number of concepts in Table 2 demonstrates the complexity of the planning situation. To aid in comprehending this complexity, we developed a scheme that visualises the relation between the categories (Fig. 1). Central in this scheme is the planning approach. An additional three categories that affect the functioning of the planning approach are defined: individual stakes, compensation mechanisms and participation. Operational problems in these categories hamper the functioning of the planning approach (zigzag line). Difficulties can also have roots outside of the actual planning process. One must therefore also consider the context in which these actors operate. Context is subdivided into the planning context and the societal context.

Societal context and planning context

Spatial planning processes are affected by the context in which they operate. First, trends in society such as the changing position of agriculture, the high pressure on land and the changing power relations between proponents of agriculture and nature are main determinants for the planning arena. The current spatial planning goals are part of this changing situation. The agricultural sector is still searching for ways to cope with these changes. The position they take in this search affects their position in the spatial planning process. Second, the planning context is determined by several factors, including a combination of socio-cultural values and flexibility and creativity of the individuals involved. Both of these factors can highly influence the atmosphere of the discussions as well as the final outcome of the meetings. (See last paragraph in this section for a detailed discussion of the importance of socio-cultural values.) Distrust and strategic behaviour can block the planning process. Previous planning experiences can influence behaviour and the relation between individuals. Moreover, experience also influences belief in the success of the process. As such, *planning history* is an important aspect of the planning context, illustrated by the following quotation:

"We were involved in the demarcation of Natura 2000 areas. At that time, this demarcation did not have concrete consequences for farmers. But afterwards, legislation has been linked to this demarcation, leading to unforeseen consequences. Therefore, we are more reluctant now during such demarcation processes." (Farmers' union)

Planning approach

The current planning approach in Flanders is composed of three planning steps: envisioning, transforming the vision into a concrete plan, and implementation of the plan. These steps are shown in

the central box in Fig. 1. In practice, the steps cannot always be distinguished in the process as clearly as presented here. For the first step, every sector should first individually define its vision on the development of a specific area, based on scientific information and focusing on spatial structures. This implies that all actors must make a vision on the desired development of their sector as a whole. Based on those sector-specific visions, the different sectors come together and discuss conflicting interests. The result of such a discussion is a consensus on the vision for a given area, concretised in a spatial plan. The final step is to draw up the implementation of this plan. In the Flemish Government, the Nature and Forest Policy Area performs scientific studies to decide which areas are best for nature development and to decide where afforestation would be most useful. The Heritage Policy Area defines which buildings or landscapes are valuable to protect. The Agriculture Policy Area gathers information on the current farming situation in a given area.

A number of respondents question the current spatial planning approach using several arguments. First, a number of respondents state that a *sectoral vision* on the future development of agriculture is completely lacking; or that the vision focuses too much on maintaining the current situation and on the direct consequences for individual farmers, rather than on *spatial structures*. The need for such a vision is expressed in the following quote: *"What I expect from the agricultural policy department is that they create a vision for the spatial structure of agriculture in the area at stake. They should give us information on the future of agriculture"* (Spatial Planning Policy Area).

Second, when every sector defines its own vision on an area, this stimulates a *sectoral planning* approach, where each group defends its own sector. As a consequence, administrative work is closely linked to politics and advocacy. As the quote below illustrates, this attitude makes it difficult to reach a constructive and trusting atmosphere for discussion.

"I think that maybe we evolved to a situation where people in the policy areas are too close to stakeholder organisations. This is true of both nature and agriculture. Such an attitude prohibits a constructive and effective cooperation between departments." (Nature and Forest Policy Area)

Third, some respondents think the approach is too linear because it is impossible to create a vision without thinking about the consequences of implementation. This point is further discussed in the next section. Finally, not everyone believes that *rational arguments* will lead to *consensus*. As one interviewee puts it: *"They try to force us into a system of consensus, but that is impossible. We cannot agree with nature development if it harms agriculture. . . . When we are confronted with such a question, we say no for reasons of principle. In the next step, we can cooperate to find solutions for involved farms. But that doesn't mean we agree with what is happening"* (Agriculture Policy Area). If certain goals cannot be realised simultaneously, then the choice to give priority to one goal does not only depend on rational arguments. This involves societal choices that are made on *apolitical level*.

What about individual stakes?

Opinions differ on when, and to what extent, individual agricultural stakes should be taken into account in a planning process. The main arguments are described in Table 2 as *"individual farm impact versus long-term vision"*. Some people think it is crucial to be aware of the impact of the plans on individual farms, even in a very early stage of planning. They believe plans should be adapted if they harm farmers too much. Therefore, they do not want to agree with a vision or plan when they do not know what the consequences for agriculture will be. Others are prepared to take the

current and desired spatial structure of agriculture into account during the planning phase, but they are convinced that the impact of the plans on individual farms should not yet be considered. This impact should only be investigated in the end and then, if possible, remedied through compensation measures. In their opinion, adapting plans for individual stakes undermines the long-term vision for regional development. The latter implies a deliberate decoupling of the envisioning, plan making and implementation steps. The consideration of individual farm impact versus long-term vision is illustrated by the following quotations:

“Those plans can have really disastrous consequences for a farm. If we think that will happen, it is our task to prevent it. But the others don’t seem to understand the impact of what they are doing.” (Agriculture Policy Area)

“It is important to consider the impact on farmers, but at a certain point, you have to implement your plans. This will surely have negative consequences for some individuals, but there is no other way.” (Nature and Forest Policy Area)

“I think it is a pity for the planning processes that they [agricultural sector] always reason from the point of view of individual farms. This is not good for the process. . . . You actually undermine it for the benefit of individual situations; the consistency and quality of your long-term plans are then undermined for an individual situation.” (Nature and Forest Policy Area)

The argumentation why people want to consider the agricultural impact also differs. Some think it is self-evident to consider the consequences of the plans one makes. For them, it is crucial to prevent personal tragedies that could arise as a consequence of development of new activities in a region. Others mainly refer to the creation of public support (from farmers and other people), which is a condition for smooth implementation of the plans:

“For me, it is important to take the consequences of our actions into account. Sometimes, it makes things go slower, but in the end, you get much farther if you get along with people.” (Nature organisation)

Compensation mechanisms

One point of attention is compensation of farmers and other actors who are affected by the planning decision. Current compensation mechanisms are mainly financial contributions to compensate for land loss or decreasing application possibilities, e.g. contributions in case of expropriation or imposition of restrictions. Another way of compensation is to give new land in exchange for the lost land (in Flanders this is institutionalised in the “gronden bank” (“land bank”). The fairness of compensation is controversial. Some people are convinced that those compensation mechanisms are sufficient and assure a fair compensation; others disagree. The two quotations below illustrate this controversy. Some respondents mention that the consequences of land loss are sometimes misjudged or denied. Moreover, a combination of actions through time or from different actors can lead to an accumulation of land loss and severe consequences on farm level. Due to the independent, uncoordinated management of various actions, these consequences might not be foreseen or taken into account. Denial of this is perceived as very unfair.

“When I see the compensation budget, I don’t understand why there is still a problem.” (Nature and Forest Policy Area)

“I rented a couple of hectares in dock expansion area. When the land was taken for dockland development, I got a contribution to compensate for the fact I couldn’t use that land anymore. However, I couldn’t find new land to rent, and buying is expensive.

The compensation I got is nothing compared to land prices. . . . So it took me seven years to get back to the level of land I had before. And I had to use my own capital for that.” (Farmer)

The complexity of spatial planning and compensation mechanisms is an important aspect that hampers the ability to judge the fairness of a given compensation measure. As legislation is complex and changes over time, it is often difficult to know what the planning consequences will be and which compensations will be necessary and feasible. As a result, farmers are left in a state of uncertainty on how they will be compensated, as illustrated by this farmer’s story:

“It must be twelve years ago now, that they came to tell me my land was being expropriated. . . . Now, after all those years, I still don’t know what will happen with my farm. There might be a possibility to move to a new location, but nothing is sure. And meanwhile, I don’t know how to manage my farm. When something breaks, I doubt whether I should fix it, or just leave it. . . .” (Farmer)

Moreover, the expected impact is perceived very different. Some respondents think the impact is very limited. Others refer to past experiences where the impact on individual farmers was enormous. In some cases, however, this negative impact would no longer be possible because legislation has changed. This demonstrates that people are not always aware of changes in legislation. Yet, certain stories which circulate as true stories even though they may not be true, also referred to as *urban legends*, still influence perception. One aspect that adds to the perceived complexity and uncertainty is the lack of guidance for the affected farmers or other land owners. Although farmers often find support in the farmers’ unions, they still expect more active support from the government to help them to judge the consequences of the planning decision and to develop and implement solutions for their farm.

“I think there are many myths about the consequences of spatial planning. People don’t know what to expect and then stories start to circulate. This is harmful to the planning process.” (Nature and Forest Policy Area)

Participation of the agricultural sector

The agricultural sector’s participation in planning processes is a difficult point. The perception is one of a *lack of participation*, or at least *no genuine participation*. Farmers, farmers’ representatives and sometimes even employees of the agriculture policy area complain that they are not invited to participate from the start of the project or planning process. Some decisions are already irreversible by the time the agricultural sector gets involved. Farmers don’t understand why they are not seen as important partners in the process, as they are the ones who will be affected by the decisions. As one of the farmers says: “Farmers have to give up land. We are the victims, but we are not involved.” Moreover, the farmers refer to past experiences where they discovered a whole process had been going on without them being informed. This gives them an uncomfortable feeling: “who knows how many other processes are going on above our heads?”

Sometimes, farmers are invited to participate, even at an early stage, but they have the feeling that they have little influence on the decisions made. The feeling of false participation is illustrated by this farmer’s quote: “If there is no room for adaptation of the plans, you shouldn’t have a public consultation, because there is nothing than can be done. . . . If there are no more alternatives, then it [the public consultation] is purely a formality.” (Farmer) Moreover, the agricultural actors are usually a minority in the meetings. Consequently, farmers are offended when their attendance results in a claim from the other actors that “farmers were involved in the process”, while they feel that they are not truly heard. People who feel that the planning

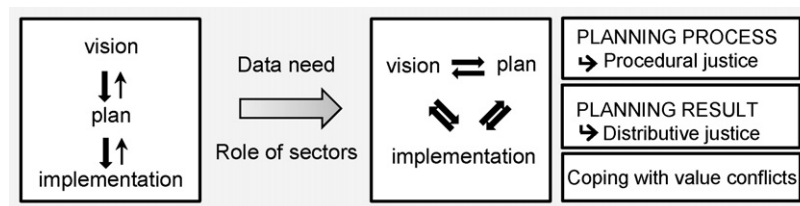


Fig. 2. Overview of the concepts explaining the difficulties of rural planning processes. These concepts follow from a discussion on the stakeholder's perception of the current planning processes in Flanders.

decision does not take their concerns into account, often go to the political level to win their case. This frustrates the other people who participate in the planning process.

The respondents cite various arguments for not involving the agricultural sector from the start of the process. First, according to the current planning approach, every sector must first define its own vision on an area (see above). This implies that studies can be performed to gather area-specific information and to create a scientifically sound vision on one sector without involving all actors. Second, in the first planning steps no concrete image of the consequences on farm level is available. Involving farmers in this stage would burden them with uncertainty for the entire duration of the process. Third, it is not clear who should participate. The farmers involved are usually too numerous for them all to participate. Therefore, *stakeholder organisations* such as farmer's unions and nature preservation organisations are often seen as the main participants. They usually are well-informed about the specific situation of each project area. But their position is difficult, because their main task is to defend one stakeholder group. The employees of policy departments are in a position to transcend the sector approach and to strive for 'place quality' in general. However, as mentioned above, the position of policy areas has evolved towards advocacy. Fourth, the other actors have negative experiences with the agricultural sector having the *power to block plans*. The sooner the agricultural sector gets involved, the more time it has to prevent a plan. A final argument is linked to the conviction that individual stakes should only be taken into account in the final step of the planning process (see above).

Different values

The concept of *socio-cultural values* is one concept of the societal context that is crucial to understand these difficulties in planning. The actors we interviewed attached different meanings and values to the main interview topics (nature, agriculture and spatial planning). For some people, nature development is an urgent goal which supersedes individual interests. Others agree with nature development, as long as it does not obstruct farming opportunities. What the respondents consider as "nature" ranges from a broad interpretation in which agriculture is also regarded as semi-nature, to a very strict view on nature, in which agriculture has no natural value at all. Similarly, different values are attached to nature development or conservation. It can be approached in a very broad manner, e.g. optimising rural activities such as agriculture to make them contribute to nature development. Alternatively, the focus can be on development of new nature reserves, where choices of the habitats that should be created and their location are strictly based on scientific insights. The following quote illustrates the existence of different views on agriculture and nature:

"I think agriculture is nature too. We are not something like industry, but we are treated as if we are." (Farmer)

For agriculture, some people think the sector should be given all possible opportunities to continue as it is. From this point of

view, all land loss is negative for the agricultural sector's development. Others are convinced that new farming paradigms should be implemented to cope with the spatial and financial challenges of agriculture. In that case, land loss or restrictions on land use are not necessarily negative, but might be the trigger to adapt the agricultural system. The discussion that follows from these different views on agricultural development is illustrated by this quote:

"The way they are trying to defend agriculture is not effective. They focus on preserving what exists. But land loss will continue and they don't seem to reflect on how agriculture can cope with that nor with other challenges the sector is facing." (Nature and Forest Policy Area)

Finally, the added value of spatial planning is perceived differently by the interviewees. One opinion is that spatial planning is indispensable for the rural area. It leads to better spatial quality, it offers legal certainty for the various actors and it allows for better allocation of resources. However, for agriculture, not everyone is convinced that the advantages of spatial planning make up for the disadvantage of losing land. Furthermore, as described in more detail above, a number of people are convinced that the current approach, based on rational arguments and a deliberative process among all actors, leads to good and fair decisions. Others doubt whether consensus is possible.

Discussion

Table 2 and the description above give insight into the difficulties that the stakeholders encounter in the planning processes in Flanders we investigated. In this section, the difficulties encountered in the planning approach are compared with literature and discussed. This analysis is visualised in a second scheme (Fig. 2).

One difficulty that is also recognised in literature is the link between the three steps of the planning approach, i.e. vision, plan and implementation. The scheme shows an adaptation of the planning approach from a mainly linear approach to a cyclic interaction between the three planning steps. Related to this, the need for data to support planning is articulated and the role of the sectors in planning is considered. Furthermore, three concepts from literature are used to explain difficulties in decision processes in general: procedural justice, distributive justice and value conflicts. According to Gross (2007), *procedural justice* is concerned with the fairness of the process by which decisions are made. *Distributive justice* focuses on the equitable distribution of outcomes, which can either be public goods or public 'burdens'. *Value conflicts* emerge when the socio-cultural values of the involved actors are so different that they cannot be realised together (Boonstra, 2006). In the following paragraphs, the above aspects are discussed further.

Link between vision/plan/implementation

According to the respondents, the current planning approach in Flanders implies a rather linear sequence, where feedback of the implementation stage to the earlier stages is meant to happen only

on occasion. Consequently, little insight is normally available about the consequences of plans during envisioning and plan-making steps. Spatial plans are developed but their implementation is not necessarily clear. Bomans et al. (2010) note that spatial plans in Flanders often lack an ‘action plan’ for implementation. Wolsink (2003) refers to a ‘funnel model’. This planning model focuses on a principal decision in an early stage of the planning process and strives to avoid new discussions and reconsiderations, thereby decreasing margins for choice in each subsequent step.

However, planning theory generally states that the various planning stages should not be completed purely linearly, but rather in parallel or interlinked with feedback loops between all stages (Van den Broeck, 2004; Albrechts, 2004; Healey, 2007). The willingness to cooperate in planning processes is diminished if stakeholders do not know how or when a plan will be implemented (Wolsink, 2003). The views of the parties involved in the implementation stage can conflict with the view of those involved in the planning stage (Wolsink, 2003). Furthermore, a linear approach does not allow the potential impact to be accounted for during the decision-making process, nor is the budget for compensating the farmers given any consideration. When these aspects come up for consideration, the plans cannot be changed easily, because too much has been invested already (Wolsink, 2003). Furthermore, farmers cannot be informed about the expected consequences for their farm, because these consequences are not yet known in the first planning steps. For the farmers, this uncertainty is hard to deal with and it stimulates the circulation of myths. Those myths or urban legends are recognised to influence public attitude towards new developments (Rogge et al., 2011). Theoretical knowledge about the importance of a strong link between the three planning stages is available but it does not seem to be adopted in the planning processes we investigated.

Need for data

Reliable data are one precondition for planning and sustainable strategies for rural areas (Verhoeve et al., 2012). To assess the consequences of a plan, the actors involved in planning need insight into the legal aspects linked to a plan (such as the consequences of changing the legal destination of an area from agriculture to nature) as well as information on the specificity of the planning area (what is the current land use, what are the prospects of this area, what are specific opportunities in this area, etc.). For the nature development sector, Maruani and Amit-Cohen (2007) refer to “ecological determinism”, where planning is determined by the natural characteristics of the land. This must therefore start with collecting and analysing data on the natural features of the plan area. Based on such information, the impact of a vision or plan for a given area can be assessed and creative, tailor-made solutions can be developed (Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007; Henle et al., 2008).

However, this information is often not easily accessible (Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007). As mentioned earlier, legislation is complex and changes over time. Typically, the general public knows very little about how the planning system actually works (Tewdwr-Jones and Thomas, 1998). Gathering information on the area-specific situation is usually labour-intensive and the situation also changes over time. Specifically for agriculture, data on prospects and opportunities are available via the farmers, but, when acting strategically, they might not share all information in the early planning stage. An additional difficulty is the uncertainty of changes in the societal or planning context which might also impact planning decisions (Couclelis, 2005). The difficulty of accessing relevant data is one of the reasons why it is complex to take the consequences of a plan into account starting from the envisioning phase.

The role of sectors in planning

In Flanders, the information needed to support planning is often gathered per sector in the framework of the sector based envisioning step (see section ‘Planning approach’ above). However, the approach where each sector first defines a vision on the preferred development of its sector triggers sector based or advocacy planning. A sector based approach tends to focus on the division of space and frames the discussion in one dimension, e.g. increase of natural area versus decrease of agricultural area (Wolsink, 2003). Bomans et al. (2010) state that spatial planning in Flanders is dominated by quantitative discussions that focus on the division of land among sectors. This approach dampens creative thinking and excludes alternative high quality solutions (Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007; Barnaud et al., in press). It also hampers debate on the true value of a plan (Mell and Sturzaker, 2011). Actors negotiate primarily to safeguard their own strategic positions (Wolsink, 2003). However, the combination of sectoral goals for the rural area cannot be realised without cooperation among sectors and among policy levels (Albrechts et al., 2000). Therefore, planning processes should transcend sectoral power games. The processes should also not be restricted to planning for use of space for agriculture and nature, but should also account for other values of open space such as recreational values and amenities for residents (Bomans et al., 2010). If participants exceed the sectoral stakes in favour of an integrated area-based planning, this would promote a focus on overall values and quality of the rural area (Albrechts et al., 2000). It would also stimulate creativity and proactive behaviour in the search for tailor-made solutions that account for the physical and socio-economic characteristics of the region (Henle et al., 2008). Finally, area-based planning would also improve coordination of actions which would prevent unforeseen accumulation of land loss for farmers.

Related to the need to transcend the sectoral approach, several respondents mention that a general vision should be developed on how agriculture can cope with the current demand for (agricultural) space. Defending only the current agricultural activities and related land use puts agriculture in a losing position. A shift of agricultural paradigm (Wiskerke and van der Ploeg, 2004; Zasada, 2011) could be the basis for a more proactive and creative approach, where agricultural development is stimulated by spatial planning processes.

Procedural justice

The concept of ‘procedural justice’ can explain difficulties in decision processes such as rural planning processes. Gross (2007) describes the primary principles of procedural justice as the right to participate in the decision-making process, the ability to express opinions freely and to be heard, to be treated with respect, to be given adequate information, and impartiality of the decision-maker. Furthermore, decisions made in a fair process are responsive to information and can be corrected in the face of new information. The perception of injustice is a determining reason for people to contest the development of a new activity in their neighbourhood (Wolsink, 2007). If the decision-making process itself is considered to be fair, people are more likely to accept the outcome, even if they are not in favour of it (Gross, 2007; Rogge et al., 2011).

These principles of procedural justice seem to be crucial in the described planning processes. Not fulfilling these process qualities seems to be a major reason for discontent among the actors we interviewed. The described resentment concerning participation of the agricultural sector in the planning processes, lack of guidance for the affected actors, and uncertainty about compensation relate to the concept of procedural justice. Some view the protest against activities that affect farmland use as being based exclusively on

individual stakes and hence, related to a selfish attitude of farmers. That spatial planning and nature development are seen as public goals that represent more important interests than individual stakes alone, is then used as an argument to not involve agricultural actors in the decision process or not take into account their remarks. However, this approach ignores the call for procedural justice (Boonstra, 2006; Wolsink, 2007).

Participation in decision making

The opportunity for participation was often mentioned in the interviews as an important condition for a successful and fair planning process. Tewdwr-Jones (1998) also found that stakeholders have a strong interest in being involved at the beginning of the process. In general and also in Flanders, a trend towards more participatory planning is observed (Buizer and Van Herzele, *in press*). This is endorsed by Broussard et al. (2008), who state that “*if plans are to succeed, planners have to involve a wide array of stakeholders and incorporate their views into the planning process.*” Participation and communication are expected to increase public support for a planning decision (Healey, 1993, 2007; Rogge, 2009; Warren and McFadyen, 2010), whereas top-down decision making is known to cause irritation and resentment (Trakolis, 2001; Wolsink, 2007; Mell and Sturzaker, 2011). Participation allows gathering available knowledge and deliberation offers the possibility of learning and interaction, better mutual understanding, the likelihood to bridge differences and more creative solutions (Healey, 1993; Buizer and Van Herzele, *in press*). Participation of local stakeholders can also contribute to a better coordination of various initiatives in a region (Trakolis, 2001). Furthermore, a participatory process creates time and opportunity for people to get used to a plan or to new ideas and increases the probability of a decision being accepted (Lynch and Gregor, 2004; Jones and Stenseke, 2011).

Notwithstanding the existing opportunities for participation in the researched planning processes, the interviewees complained about the lack of participation. Several attention points have been formulated that might explain their opinion of the participatory planning process. First, the invitation for participation must be genuine, as unfulfilled expectations about participation trigger opposition rather than cooperation (Tewdwr-Jones, 1998; Wolsink, 2007). Participants should be able to truly influence the plan. Therefore, participation should go beyond the public display of plans and public hearings (Arnstein, 1969; Gross, 2007; Rogge et al., 2012). People should be involved early, before implementation has gone so far that participation is too late to be effective (Jones, 2011). Second, participation in a planning process implies knowledge of specific planning language and is therefore not equally accessible for all participants (Tewdwr-Jones and Thomas, 1998; Rogge et al., 2012). Including stakeholder groups in a planning process might therefore dampen the “fire” of the action group (Sager, 2009). They are not supposed to undertake protest actions against the plans while they are taking part in the planning process. Furthermore, if they do not have the equipment (both intellectual and organisational) to fully participate, their position in the participatory process is weakened. For these reasons, land-use planning processes often remain expert-driven and the decisions reflect the preferences of professional planners and policymakers (Glover et al., 2008; Rogge, 2009). According to Tewdwr-Jones (1998), the planning authorities cannot easily translate the communities’ needs and desires as stated in a participatory process into practical planning policies or implementation plans.

A third and crucial element is the positive attitude of both the institutions and the individuals involved. Participants should be committed to reaching mutual understanding free from strategic action (Owen et al., 2000; Sager, 2009). As illustrated in section ‘Results’, this condition is hard to fulfil in a planning arena where

final decisions depend on the political level. Moreover, power relations inevitably play a role in negotiations, irrespective of good agreements about fair and rational planning (Boonstra, 2006). Finally, one must be aware of the significance of the process manager’s role (Owen et al., 2000; Jones, 2011). In the shift towards participatory planning, planners are often expected to take this role of process manager as an extension of their job. However, one should possess the appropriate skills to manage a process and the people that participate (Owen et al., 2000; Jones, 2011). It is also important that the process manager is perceived as impartial (Gross, 2007). The choice of the process manager therefore deserves specific attention.

Distributive justice

A fair and participatory planning process is not the only key factor for successful planning. The controversy on the fairness of compensation and the frustration concerning the planning approach (e.g. lack of long term agricultural vision, too much focus on special interest groups and advocacy) show that it is necessary to focus on the fairness of the planning result too. Gross (2007) refers to the concepts of *outcome favourability* and *distributive justice*, which focuses on the equitable distribution of outcomes. According to Gross (2007), people who are personally affected (positively or negatively) by a decision will attach more importance to outcome favourability than to process fairness. The same holds for moral proponents or objectors, who have an overriding belief in a specific outcome.

In the planning processes we investigated, too much focus on individual stakes at the expense of a long-term vision was considered unfavourable. Nevertheless, from the agricultural point of view, loss of farmland is considered an unfavourable outcome. It is also considered unfair that the burdens of an increased necessity for nature development would be shifted entirely onto the farmers while the benefits are enjoyed by society as a whole. In general, it is recognised that some loss to a small section of society is inevitable during the development of the entire community (Li et al., 2012). To avoid confrontations and resentment, however, it is crucial to be sensitive to the individual stakes and to ensure fair compensation of those affected (van der Veen et al., 2010; Li et al., 2012).

Value conflicts

The concept of ‘value conflicts’ also helps to understand the difficulties encountered in planning processes. As illustrated above (Results), the actors involved in rural planning have different values concerning nature, agriculture and spatial planning. Other researchers have observed this as well (Spaling and Wood, 1998; Bogaert, 2004; Boonstra, 2006; Healey, 2007; Wolsink, 2007; Busck et al., 2008 and others). Value conflicts emerge when values are so basically different that they cannot be realised at the same time (Boonstra, 2006). As a rule, values cannot be changed through rational arguments. Moreover, whereas interests can be made commensurable, often in monetary terms, values are often impossible to measure using a common scale (Owen et al., 2000; Boonstra, 2006). The latter is referred to by Boonstra (2006) as “value incommensurability”.

The occurrence of value conflicts also explains part of the dissatisfaction observed in the investigated planning processes. The people interviewed did not always agree about which values to strive for, or they expressed the feeling that their values were not reflected in the final decisions. In such a case, a fair and rational process in itself is not the key to consensus (Boonstra, 2006). Rather, one should be sensitive to the grievance of the affected groups and admit that difficult choices have to be made, thereby stating explicitly that society chooses to harm the values of one group in

favour of other values (Boonstra, 2006; Li et al., 2012). The people interviewed do seem to want their loss to be recognised. This recognition also opens opportunities to discuss the prioritisation of values in rural development and policy (Boonstra, 2006). Therefore, it is important to gain insight into the values of the stakeholder involved and to be aware of relevant value conflicts. This insight will also help to search for solutions that harm these values as little as possible (Owen et al., 2000; Rogge, 2009; Li et al., 2012), and consequently improve the procedural and distributive justice. The concept of value incommensurability also helps to understand the controversy on compensation fairness. When the implementation of a project conflicts with someone's values, it is logical that financial compensation does not lead to full satisfaction (Boonstra, 2006).

Proposals for improvement

The above description of difficulties in planning evokes a number of possible strategies for improvement. The proposals for improvement start from the same three concepts that have been introduced in the discussion. Concretising these concepts into solutions, participation, communication and a professional process management are considered crucial for assuring procedural justice. Moreover, guidance of the people affected appears to be necessary. A guiding contact person can provide information on the ongoing process and the expected consequences for the individual. Moreover, support can be offered to actively search for tailor-made solutions. This should decrease the uncertainty on what is about to happen and allow people to act proactively in the face of upcoming changes.

Concerning distributive justice, a more cyclic interaction between the three planning steps is proposed and the importance of fair compensation is emphasised. To achieve this, integrated area-based planning, creative and proactive thinking and tailor-made solutions are considered to be key elements. The specificity of the planning area determines the potential implementation approaches, and this might create different starting points for the envisioning and planning step. For example, in a region with opportunities for nature-friendly farming (e.g. current farming practices can be combined with reaching nature goals, involved farmers are receptive for this idea, and so on), different visions, plans and implementation solutions could evolve. Data that provide insight into the physical and socio-economic characteristics of the region involved are important for supporting this type of planning.

Finally, one should be aware of the occurrence of value conflicts in planning processes. As discussed earlier, unfulfilled values create resistance to a plan. Therefore, one must gain awareness of the values of the stakeholders in the planning area. Solutions or compensation strategies can then be sought which best match the different values at play. If a farmer's wish is to be able to continue farming, compensation budgets might better be applied for a general project that improves the agricultural situation, rather than donating a lump sum to each farmer involved. One example is a land consolidation project which leads to better structured farms and more efficient agricultural activities on the remaining farmland. Another example is to stimulate and support the introduction of remunerative activities, such as on-farm selling or a farmers' market. Farmers could also be allowed to maintain their current farming practices for a given period. Although one should be careful that people indeed use this time in a constructive way and not just see it as a temporary reprieve, such a gradual approach might decrease the farmer's resistance. When it is impossible to realise all values, explicit recognition of the difficult choice is another way to relieve the dissatisfaction.

Conclusions

In this research, we investigated the process of rural planning in Flanders, with a specific focus on the tension between agricultural and natural functions. In-depth interviews were performed with actors who are involved in such rural planning processes. By involving stakeholders in a qualitative approach, we were able to scrutinise current planning processes in Flanders. Notwithstanding the specificity of the case, the information derived about the complexity of planning processes and the proposals for improvement that we formulated can contribute to the knowledge about rural planning processes in general.

The stakeholders we interviewed identified several difficulties with rural spatial planning processes. These difficulties related mainly to three aspects: (1) procedural justice; (2) distributive justice; and (3) value conflicts. Ensuring a fair process is a major attention point. Participation, communication, professional process management and sufficient guidance of the farmers affected are crucial to counteract uncertainty and the perception of unfairness. A second attention point is the planning result itself. Improvement is expected through a shift from sector based planning to more integrated area-based planning, with a stronger link between all planning phases and an emphasis on tailor-made solutions. Fair compensation also deserves attention. Finally, the impact of value conflicts on planning processes must be recognised. Rural actors appear to have profoundly different views on planning, nature and agriculture. Part of the rational arguments that are linked to the planning process and the planning result might hide argumentation that is actually linked to different values. Strategies to cope with these value conflicts should therefore be incorporated into the planning process. Although most of the described concepts are well established in planning theory, the analysis of stakeholders' perception shows that the adoption in practice is not yet perfect. When evaluating planning systems, one should be aware of this gap between theoretical insights into planning systems and the stakeholders' perception of the planning process.

This research focuses on the position of agriculture in relation to natural functions of the rural area. The rising number of planning initiatives related to the choice between agricultural development and nature development indicates the relevance of this choice. But the agriculture-nature choice is not the only one being made: the rural area is also faced with housing developments, industrial zones, road construction and dockland expansion. Additional groups of actors with an interest in these rural planning decisions, e.g. house owners, entrepreneurs and tourists, could also be interviewed in future research. Results of a similar investigation using other planning processes and other actors could be compared with ours. Such parallel research would deepen the insight into ongoing rural planning processes.

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